ORATORY AS AN ART

Its Masters Cannot Tell Wherein Their Powers Lie.

IT IS AN INBIDING FACULTY

Bourke Cockran Describes His Physical Sensations When Facing an Audience--Loses His Identity.

Most people think it is an easy thing to be eloquent, and I suppose every generous hearted boy has thought in his heart that given due time and opportunity he, too, would move the hearts and wills of men. But when the time came and he hazarded the attempt, some strange, paralyzing barrier erected itself between him and success and he retired discomfited.

Now, books enough have been written about rhetoric and elocution, and the speeches of past masters of oratory have been analyzed down to the last syllable and the secret of their effect has been investigated. The hopeful student has spoken the same words that were uttered aforetime by Demosthenes, Chatham, Webster and Phillips, sedulously observing all the directions as to expression, intonation and gesture, and after all nothing momentous has come of it. There is a mystery in the matter which the ingenuity of the school books failed to interpret, nor has any prophet arisen to declare it.

Under these circumstances it occurred to me that it might prove a wise thing to go to the living exponents of the art, themselves, and induce them to reveal what is so curiously hidden. They must have learned it somehow, themselves; and why should they not teach it to others? Looking over the available field in this country I could not help noticing in the immediate foreground the figure of the young orator of Tammany, Mr. Bourke Cockran, and to him, accordingly, I forthwith betook myself.

I am bound to admit, at the outset, that after a conversation of some duration, in the course of which Mr. Cockran did all that courtesy and good will could accomplish toward enlightening my void, I came away, at last, charmed and persuaded indeed, but with little more practical ability to make the convention speech, for example, than I possessed an hour before. I shall try, however, to describe my experience; and it may be that some one more alert than I may succeed in catching the subtle enigma by the tail.

The difficulty began with the personal equation of the man himself—Bourke Cockran. I perceived that in order to speak as he does I should first have to be made somewhat in his image. He is certainly a superb human creature. He is a large man, and the immediate impression he produces is that of quiet and easy strength. His head is massive, yet it is compactly built; a thick growth of brown hair covers it, and the face is clean shaven. The features of this countenance are eloquent and harmonious. You see there the soul of the artist, the lover of the beautiful combined with the composure of the man of the world and the insight and experience of the statesman. Beneath the self-command you are conscious of the fire and passion which are held in control, but which can upon occasion be freed to do their appointed work. It is a winningly sympathetic face, and, for a man of ideas and affairs, a remarkably cheerful one. I should venture to think Mr. Cockran a man happy in temperament and circumstances who uniformly does what he sets out to do in the way he set out to do it. Upon the whole, he bears a likeness to the portraits of another famous orator—Charles James Fox; the thick eyebrows, the wide space beneath them, the strong nose, the well knit forehead,

BOURKE COCKRAN.

marked with horizontal creases, and the eyes with their curved lids. Whether their oratorical creed and practice be alike I have no means of judging. But Mr. Cockran has one of the most agreeable voices I ever listened to, so that no matter how little I might agree with the sentiments he was uttering, I would no more desire to interrupt him than I would think of breaking in upon a sonata by Beethoven. Not less pleasant is his laugh and the throwing back of the head that accompanies it.

When I remarked that Blaine had intimated to me but year that the art of oratory was at least different from what it had been in the days of Clay and Webster Mr. Cockran took an exception. The gist of his comment was that eloquence is always an abiding faculty in mankind, but follows the law of supply and demand; it is modified in its special expression by the occasion that calls it forth. "This, for example, is a time of profound peace," said he, "and the subjects which men have to speak upon are of a business nature; you cannot move audiences to tears about such. The hope is to be clearly set forth and argued out; persuasion must be effected by reason. In the era of our national formation and struggle for existence, and again at the time of our civil war, passion and emotion were in the ascendant, and our oratory partook of those qualities. Clay and Webster and the rest became the exponents of the ruling feelings of their age. But oratory in its essence remains the same now as it was then."

"But," said I, "there are only certain picked men in each age through whom the thoughts of the people find eloquent expression."

"There is a gift, without which art and study can accomplish little. The effective speech is the extemporaneous one. Addresses written and committed beforehand never have the same influence over a mixed and excited audience that words inspired by the immediate occasion do. There is, no doubt, a time for set orations and read addresses, but the audience in these cases know what they have to expect, and attune themselves accordingly. The highest flights of oratory and the full

A FAVORITE POSE OF COCHRAN'S.

identification of the speaker with his subject and with his hearers are seldom or never attained in that way. You may forecast your topic, and of course you must have adequate familiarity with it and know what special phase of it you are to present, but any further preparation than this is of little avail. For you can never tell beforehand in what humor your audience will be, nor what circumstances may arise to modify the situation. To succeed, the first need is to be at one with your hearers, you must be able to put into words the thoughts that they are thinking at the moment—or at least to make clear to them and put in logical order the confused contents of their minds. Mr. Ingersoll has said, I believe," added Mr. Cockran, "that there is no such thing as extempore speaking, but I can't agree with that. A true speech is the creation of the moment, but it is so created, not, as one might suppose, by the orator, but by his audience. I have found this to be so in my own experience."

I suggested that perhaps the famous speech at the convention last year might be an instance in point.

"It was certainly not prepared," replied Mr. Cockran. "There is not and never was any record of it except the reports in the daily newspapers. Almost up to the moment that I rose to speak I had meant to remain silent; indeed, I had left the hall some hours before intending to go home. But I was hungry and I got some dinner, and then I no longer felt sleepy and went back to the hall. The convention was very turbulent and noisy; an hour and ten minutes were used up in giving cheers for Cleveland and Hill. Speakers of neither side could get a hearing. Although the convention was almost entirely pledged to Cleveland his supporters were used as unceremoniously as those of the other side. When the chairman asked me to address the meeting, I said: 'What is the use? The vote has been settled.' 'Never mind,' said he, 'go ahead; if something is not done we shall be made ridiculous.' Then I got up and spoke. My audience was indulgent from the first. They became silent as soon as I began, and remained attentive to the end. They had already made up their minds how they were going to vote, and only three or four votes were changed in consequence of what I said, but I had their sympathy for the time being, nevertheless."

"I have been told," I said, "that when Henry Clay was speaking he lost his physical sensitiveness, so that if a pin were run into him he would not feel it. Do you fall into such a state as that?"

"I can understand that it may be so. Oratory is a sort of spiritual state. You are raised as it were out of the body and are conscious only of the ideas that are finding utterance through you. A mystical tie is established between the speaking and the hearing elements; they are identified.

He leaned back in his chair and added: "In oratory, and probably in other forms of art, the best results are obtained when the personality of the artist is least obtruded. You must forget yourself in order to do high things. As in religion, you come nearest the ideal when you are furthest from what belongs to the conscious self."

As I contemplated my host and reflected how young he was and how much he had achieved I was moved to ask him at what age he had begun to turn his thoughts in the direction of oratory.

He laughed and answered that he had always faced thitherward.

"When I was a boy," said he, "I used to go out to walk alone and make speeches to myself. It has been my best from the first. But there is really less opportunity now than there used to be for oratory," he concluded, as I made ready to depart. "The newspapers are doing most of our work now—they cut the ground from under our feet."

The rest of our conversation was not germane to the point now at issue. In saying farewell I could not help feeling that I had been given at least as much enlightenment as I had had skill to ask for, and yet, as I said before, I remained inexpert. Mr. Bourke Cockran can do wonderful things, but he cannot teach me how to be an orator. The best things in life are incommunicable. Were it otherwise, there would soon be nothing left unvulgarized and unprofaned. JULIAN HAWTHORNE.